

The rites of passage and liminality essay sample



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Originally developed by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in the early 20th century in his book *Rites de Passage*, the term liminality refers to the concept in which participants are in the threshold stage of disorientation and suspension from the previous social norm that they were used to. When an individual goes through a rite of passage—also coined by van Gennep—he is cut off from his “old life” and is born again into a new person. However, before he can fully become a new person and finish his rite of passage, he is suspended in a liminal stage that bridges the old self with the newly acknowledged self. In other words, he is in a stage of disorientation and amorphous identity. Found throughout all cultural societies, the rite of passage and its components manifests much about a certain culture and its religious values through both secular public events—graduation, reaching adulthood, and marriage—and ceremonial rituals—birth, marriage, the hajj, and death. Derived from the Latin word *limen* meaning “the threshold”, the concept of liminality was later adopted by Victor Turner and applied to an extensive number of cultural rites that have been observed globally.

The rites of passage can be categorized into three phases: preliminal (separation), liminal (transition), and postliminal (reincorporation). The preliminal phase is where the participant was the same person as when first born, then passed through a “death”, which propels him into the liminal phase where he waits until the rite of passage and initiation is completed before being in the postliminal phase, the phase where he is reincorporated into society as a new person. In the Ndembu society, a boy is not yet a man until he has passed through the liminal stage of special “schooling” with other boys. This collective group of young boys going through the liminal

stage is called a *communitas*, which is an intense togetherness spirit that solidifies the community and the statuses of the participants. Taken from their family and placed into a special “school”, they are prepared to be publicly transformed into men in a four month process known as *mukanda*. The night before the rite of passage was to be performed, the male relatives and community would dance and sing all night in costumes and masks, awakening the boys consecutively to parade them around in the ritual.

Before they were about to be “killed”, the mothers would sorrowfully feed their sons a “Last Supper” as if they were still infants. Shortly thereafter, the boys were marched down to a clearing known as the “place of dying”, and suddenly attacked by the guardian males, who held each boy down and circumcised him. Upon having their wounds fully healed, they were then allowed to return unto their village as men. According to the Islamic culture and society, every Muslim must make a trek to Mecca—the *hajj*—at least once in their lifetime to pay tribute to Allah, the God of the Islam religion. The trek is a mandatory component of being a good Muslim for that is the secular proclamation of being a faithful follower, as according to the Prophet Muhammed who said that a person will journey to Mecca a sinful man and return home afterwards as a newborn baby purified.

The ritual itself consists of five steps, each categorized into a day: the purifying *ihram* in which all men are in unity and peace, and the desperate run from the hills of *Safa* to *Marwa* in remembrance of *Hagar*; the travel to *Arafah* to repent of their sins and collect seventy pebbles as somewhat totems; the return to *Mina* to throw the collected pebbles at the *Jamarat*, which is a symbol of evil in the world, and rejoice in the *Eid-ul-Adha*

celebration of giving thanks; then leaving Mecca to return unto Medina and praise worship in front of the three Pillars; and then finally returning to Mecca to stone the Jamarat once more and receive completion of their Holy Pilgrimage. Each year, millions of Muslims and Arabs embark upon the hajj in order to pay tribute and purify themselves as a new person, crowding up the Medina Pillars and causing a huge sensation of intense communitas.

Indeed, the journey itself can be considered a liminal phase in their rite of passage. In American society, liminality occurs over a wider span of time than other societies, and sometimes not marked by any significant rituals at all until nearly two decades after birth. The uncertain and prolonged period of stress and changes that are not marked or defined is known as adolescence, where the child physically, mentally, and emotionally transitions into the life of an adult without much ritual markers to help clarify. This prolonged period of confusion is marked by high rates of suicide, anti-social behaviors, and rebellion.

Nevertheless, as late as it might come, high school graduation and getting one's first job are also still considered a prominent event in the adolescent's life when one receives the ceremonial diploma of completion; even turning 18 years old is also a huge occasion for in American society, for one is considered and recognized publicly to be an adult and cease being a minor the moment one turns 18. Also, walking down the aisle to be married to another person is a huge liminal tenet in not only American society, but also in other societies, for it is a ceremony performed to include both people in a bond and marks the beginning of a new stage: life together. Not only so, but

marriage is also a secular event in that it involves both the groom's and the bride's side of family and friends.

Indeed, no matter what the culture or the society, every individual passes through one form of liminality or another, and when groups of people pass through the rites of passage at the same time for the same reason, they cause a *communitas* essence in the culture. From the Ndembu to the Islamic people to the Americans, the rites of passage are an integral part of being a human, of changing and ameliorating into a better person.